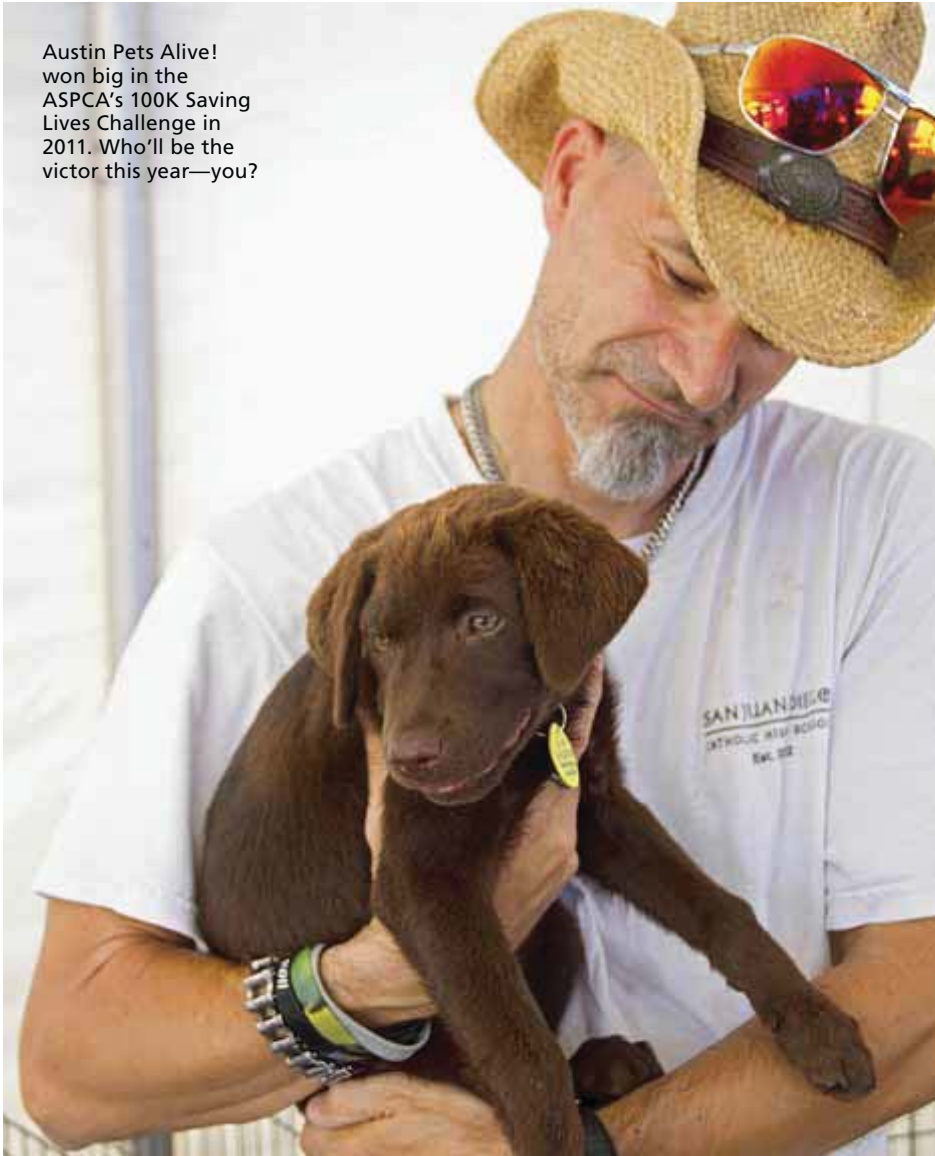


Beyond the Comfort Zone

ASPCA \$100K Challenge winners pushed themselves to do more

BY CARRIE ALLAN

Austin Pets Alive!
won big in the
ASPCA's 100K Saving
Lives Challenge in
2011. Who'll be the
victor this year—you?



The teams from the ASPCA arrived in secret—some of them under cover of darkness—at locations around the country. Maine. California. Missouri and Mississippi and Texas and Florida.

They set their agendas carefully. They ordered cakes, each one inscribed in frosting with mysterious numbers: 739. 1,403. 1,673. They bought balloons and sparkling cider. And they prepared to deliver big news.

On Nov. 30, 2011, at noon Eastern Standard Time no matter where in the country they actually were, the teams descended on the animal welfare organizations that made up the top contestants of the ASPCA's \$100K Challenge. Until the moment they arrived at the doors of each shelter, it was all very hush-hush, says Bert Troughton, vice president of community outreach at the ASPCA.

"On the cakes, we just had the number of lives that each group saved, because we knew that if we called ahead and ordered a cake that had the agency name or anything that if somebody worked there, it could leak. ... Everything was like, top, top secret."

There was a celebration at each of the top-ranking organizations, which had pulled out the stops to save 300 more animals than they had during the same three months in 2010. But for one organization, it was a particularly big celebration.

The Big Winner

When Troughton and her team arrived at Austin Pets Alive! (APA) in Texas, the buzz began around the organization's facility. "They had such a strong lead, and they probably knew they won something," she says. "I think they were probably figuring hopefully they at least won the Southwest regional, and they were also in the running for the community engagement award."

The ASPCA didn't tell them the results right away. They went on a tour of the shelter while APA staff set up a space outside for the announcement and pulled their staff and volunteers together. "There was one family that was in the middle of an adoption, and they pulled them out with them so they could be part of it," says Troughton.

"So I'm talking to them, [saying] 'You know what you did, you saved all these lives, and here are the numbers and I have a little check here—we had one of those giant checks—and it's made out for ... and then I turned it around so they could see \$100,000, and they were all like, 'AAAAAAHHH!'" Troughton says, laughing at the memory. "Half of them had whatever animal they were working with at the time in their arms and they were all crying and hugging. It was really sweet."

Sweet—and a well-deserved victory. APA saved 1,673 animals in the three-month period of the challenge, 850 more than it had

[life preservers]



Hot dog! Even terrible summer heat couldn't keep Austinites from coming out to support the shelter's adoption efforts.

done the year before—thus winning the grand prize and the Southwest regional prize as well. The runner-up, the Humane Society of South Mississippi (HSSM) in Gulfport, saved a total of 2,183, but since the contest awards the grand prize for the biggest improvement, APA won—beating HSSM's improvement of 835 by 15 animals.

APA accomplished its goal in spite of some major challenges. "You remember what summer was like in Texas," says Troughton. "Two and a half months of record-breaking heat, severe drought, they lost air conditioning at one point, and all around them, Texas was on fire."

The challenge was an uphill slog, says Gretchen Meyers, PR and marketing director for APA. During the first month, it looked like an impossibility. "The AC in our vans couldn't keep up with the heat, so we were cancelling all our adoption events," she says. "And that's really our thing: off-site adoption events; we're everywhere in the city, every day."

Not being able to get out there was a major handicap for getting started strong. "The first month was really kind of depressing. ... We definitely were questioning whether we could pull it off."

And then came Labor Day weekend, and with it, the Bastrop County wildfires.

A Silver Lining

The fires were among the worst to hit the state in what turned out to be a record

fire season; they merged and burned for a month to become what's now thought to be the most damaging single fire in the state's history. While APA itself wasn't in the danger zone, the Bastrop Animal Shelter had to be evacuated. Many animal groups stepped up to help—and oddly enough, the fires actually helped boost APA out of its adoption slump.

The other big shelter in Austin had held a huge adoption event that resulted in the placement of almost all its animals, so when the fires hit, "they jumped in and helped by holding on to strays that were found in Bastrop," says Meyers. "But because they were doing that, they couldn't take in many for adoption, so we were filling that role. And the public was so engaged and they wanted to help these pets, so the word was getting out there, and adopters were just coming out in droves. So that's what reversed the trend."

Meyers notes that APA is already extremely focused on adoptions, and that getting the community more engaged presented a challenge. The heat was also a major issue: The group had planned to have one of its biggest events at the end of September, thinking it would be cooler by then, says marketing lead Stacy Morabito. And on the morning of their biggest adoption event at PetSmart, they set up all the cat cages outside, assuming that it would be warm but not ridiculous.

"But it ended up being over 100 degrees," she says. Animals were panting and "we had to move all the cats inside, and that was a ton of work because we had spent hours setting them up outside in the first place." This while they had people waiting to adopt—and yet, Morabito says, she didn't hear any complaints from the attendees or from the volunteers, many of whom worked 14-hour days both days of the adopt-a-thon weekend.

"They really had an uphill battle," says Troughton. "It's a remarkable organization—they operate in a very modest building—and I'm using 'modest' in quotations, because it is not the Taj Mahal. For anybody doing the challenge, they find that moving that volume through the building is hard on the building, it's hard on your systems, it's really hard on your spay/neuter team. So for them to increase by 850 animals—that was a lot to do in that building and with that team."

But Austin, Morabito points out, is very community-oriented in its spirit, and so with the fires burning and animals in need, she thinks that people who had been considering adopting decided it was time, wanting to help in whatever ways they could.

New Building, New Challenges

In second place by a mere 15 lives saved, the Humane Society of South Mississippi's



Top: The Humane Society of South Mississippi, which came in second in the challenge, took every opportunity to remind its staff and supporters of the big goal.

Bottom: A beautiful new building—including this Gulf-themed cat room, completed after Hurricane Katrina—brought the Humane Society of South Mississippi new prominence in its community, but new challenges as well.

achievement is no less astonishing, especially when one considers the cultural differences between famously progressive Austin and Gulfport, Miss. And the group's work must also be considered in the context of what it's experienced over the past decade.

In 2005, HSSM was operating out of a World War II-era armory bunker, located near the sewage treatment facility and the little airport that serves the city. "We had basically dirt walls, almost all dog housing was outdoors, and our live release rate hovered around the 25 percent mark," says Krystyna Szczechowski, marketing specialist for the shelter. The organization was a few months away from moving into its new facility when Hurricane Katrina hit, wiping out huge areas of southern Mississippi, flooding the old shelter, and forcing the group to move into the new facility before it was complete.

The new facility was light years ahead of what the organization had before, says Szczechowski, but wasn't the panacea some had hoped it would be: With the beautiful new building on a main road in a busy business district in the city, HSSM actually saw its intake numbers rise as people became more aware of the shelter's presence. "Being in South Mississippi, we have some hurdles as far as the culture of pet ownership goes," Szczechowski says. "People don't necessarily think as soon as they get a pet, 'Oh, I have to get it fixed, and microchipped and to the vet ...' Those are some of the challenges we're facing as we try to reinvent the culture here."

The group has been meeting those challenges, establishing an onsite spay/neuter clinic and focusing heavily on trap-neuter-return to address the feral cat issue in the community—the shelter even recently hired a full-time staffer to focus on TNR. After seven years and many ups and downs along the way, Szczechowski says, they've figured out that in 2012, if they can decrease intake and increase positive outcomes by 5 percent each, they can reach a 67 percent live re-



Bert Troughton of the ASPCA does the big reveal at Austin Pets Alive! in November 2011.

lease rate by the end of the year—a pretty astonishing leap forward from where they were before Katrina.

Changing the Culture, Inside and Out

Even with all their progress, when Szczechowski and customer care manager Shelli Skiados thought that HSSM should compete in the challenge, many of their colleagues thought they were a little nuts to believe the organization could save still more animals. The difficulty was even greater since they'd recently lost their volunteer manager—but Skiados and Szczechowski decided to take on that role themselves. "We were like, 'Sleep? Who sleeps?'" jokes Skiados.

The pair drilled deeply into the shelter's data, trying to figure out what would have to happen to make the numbers come together. And they completely revamped the way the shelter used volunteers, hosting a public workshop to engage new members of the community and let them know what they were taking on and what help they needed. "Basically every job and every department in the shelter is now available for volunteers to be involved in," says Skiados, whereas before only certain areas admitted volunteer help. It changed the culture of the shelter, the women say: Most of the volunteers who came on during the challenge were new, and most of them are still there helping.

The doubters began to grow quiet after the shelter's first big adoption event during the challenge, when the group adopted 226 animals in 24 hours—a record for the orga-

nization. "That's when our staff and volunteers and board and our entire community realized that South Mississippi could really be a contender in a nationwide competition that had to do with animal welfare," says Szczechowski.

It was a huge moment for the group, Troughton says, noting that there was a point during the challenge when HSSM realized that, for the first time in its history, it wasn't having to euthanize for space.

While Skiados and Szczechowski say that coming in second was hard to swallow, winning the \$25K second-place prize and the top award for the Southeast region was great news.

And when they look back at their decision to take on the challenge, they have no regrets. As they figured at the beginning, says Szczechowski, "What could it hurt at the end of the day? We'll either have a ton of animals saved and an extra 100K to put into our programs, or we won't have the money, but we'll still have animals saved."

Whether you're considering entering the challenge officially or just challenging yourselves and your community to do more, it's a great attitude—and one that can help get more animals out of the shelter and into loving homes. **AS**

The 2012 Challenge starts in May—and this year, the ASPCA is teaming up with Rachael Ray. For more information, including ideas for winning strategies and a complete list of the 2011 Challenge winners, go to aspcapro.org.